Little recalled today are the dramatic humanitarian roles played by two Swedish passenger liners that plied the seven seas without the danger of being sunk or molested in World War II

**Missions of MERCY**

**BY THOMAS LARSEN**

Virtually forgotten in the sprawling saga of the Second World War are the exploits of two Swedish passenger liners that played uniquely benevolent roles as internee repatriation ships — the MS Gripsholm and its running mate SS Drottningholm. Best known as “mercy ships” to the thousands of war victims they safely returned from the grips of the enemy, these valiant vessels traveled the world’s wartime seas under a flag of neutrality that was mutually respected by the Allied and the Axis nations.

With Sweden a neutral nation, each of these ships shared the unusual distinction of being granted immunity from submarine attack or any form of molestation as they ventured unescorted to and from distant ports even though they were in fact contracted to the US government. Chartered by the US Department of State at the astounding cost of $17,000 per day

The MS Gripsholm in full war-time high-visibility markings during a prisoner exchange. Even though the ship was brightly lit and painted, each voyage was still hazardous as one never knew what the enemy would do.

from the Swedish American Line, these plush pre-war liners wrote a fascinating history all their own that by war’s end saw the Gripsholm alone transport more than 27,000 passengers over 125,000 nautical miles.

**GLOBAL WAR HALTS TRANSOCEANIC CIVILIAN TRAVEL**

The impact of Hitler’s suddenly declared war at sea when the liner Athenia was torpedoed and sunk with a loss of 112 lives, in September 1939, was destined to soon cause a cessation of all commercial transoceanic passenger travel. With many European seaports blockaded or otherwise denied the passage of normal commerce, the neutral nations inevitably became caught up in restrictive “war fever” with few shipping lines willing to place their prized liners at the risk of being sunk on the high seas.

Within months of the outbreak of war, European ports from Antwerp to Naples were crowded with hundreds of thousands of refugees desperately trying to escape the wrath of Hitler’s Anschluss. As shipping line after shipping line posted “ALL SAILINGS CANCELED” notices the rush to seek asylum on friendlier shores reached fever pitch. Sadly, all too few managed to procure berths on the last Italian ships steaming for the sanctuaries of North and South American seaports in the spring of 1940. By then, a similar mood had also swept the Pacific rim countries with both American and Japanese liners cautiously treading troubled political waters liable to break into open conflict at any moment. As a result, by 1941 transatlantic and transpacific commercial passenger travel had vanished completely; except for those possessing high priority clearances on government operated vessels. Gradually idled by the growing belligerency, the world’s stately fleets of ocean liners disappeared from familiar trade routes; laid up to rust in remote back waters, or hastily pressed into troop carrier and military transport roles.

**Female Red Cross personnel greet Allied soldiers as the Gripsholm pulls into Algiers on 20 May 1944. Besides being well-lit at night, the ship’s name was painted in extremely large letters.**

**Enjoying the good life aboard the SS Drottningholm — Greta Garbo and Mauritz Stiller aboard the liner during their 1925 voyage to the USA.**

**Female Red Cross personnel greet Allied soldiers as the Gripsholm pulls into Algiers on 20 May 1944. Besides being well-lit at night, the ship’s name was painted in extremely large letters.**